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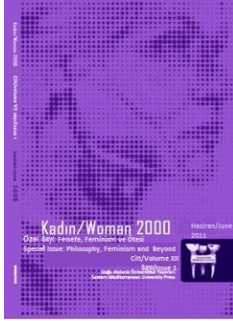
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'To overcome the hurdles': Locating Feminist Literary Research in 1990s' Poland

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Abstract

The 1989 collapse of the Polish socialist system had several impacts on the country's gender discourse. Not only did conservative discourses voice the return to a 'traditional' gender order, but also the legal grounds shifted with the ban on abortion in 1993 and the dismissal of a parity law in 2003. Even though this backlash evoked social movements and academic interest in gender issues, the new initiatives had to struggle with many obstacles. Feminism was strongly connoted with communism, a bogey which had only just been expelled. In this article, strategies of adaptation and subversion of public narratives will be examined on the example of feminist works in 1990s' Polish literary studies. Unlike socialist gender research, feminist Polish studies of the 1990s shifted to an interest in culture and the historical dimension of gendered national narratives. In the 1990s, literary historical research integrated theoretical inputs from the so-called West. Both turning to pre-war literature and engaging with 'Western' theories worked towards distancing feminism from the connotation of communist ideology. Literary studies interfere with the discourses about national identity by questioning cultural memory and engagement with the past via their literary research material. This results in some cases in the establishment of feminism of difference, underlining the distinctiveness of female experience and cultural output. This in turn can be seen in the light of strengthening feminist identity in a disapproving society. At the same time, feminist Polonists subordinate to the narrative of catching up with global (academic) progress as they perceive feminist thought to be 'lagging behind' in Poland. The simultaneous reception of different theoretical strands leads to a certain conceptual fuzziness, while at the same time individualist approaches deny political engagement and support neoliberal cultural transformations.

Keywords: Poland, communism, literary studies, neotraditional backlash, neoliberalism, theory transfer, ideology, academia.

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‘Engellerin Üstesinden Gelmek’: 1990’ların Polonyasında Feminist Edebiyat Araştırmaları İncelenmesi

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Öz

Polonya sosyalist sisteminin 1989 yılında çökmesi, ülkenin cinsiyet söyleminde çeşitli etkiler yaratmıştı. Sadece muafazakar söylemlerin sesi ‘geleneksel’ cinsiyet sıralamasına dönmekle kalmamış, 1993 yılında kürtaja getirilen yasak ve 2003 yılında parite yasasının kaldırılması gibi hukuki dayanaklar değiştirilmiştir. Bu geriye dönüş, toplumsal hareketlenmelere ve toplumsal cinsiyet sorununa akademik ilginin artmasına neden olmuş olsa da, bu yeni girişimler birçok engel ile mücadele etmek zorunda kalmıştır. Feminizm komünizmle özdeşleştirilmiş ve hemen kovulması gereken bir şeytan olarak görülmüştür. Bu makalede, 1990’lı yıllardaki Polonya edebiyat araştırmalarında yer alan feminist çalışma örnekleri üzerinden, başetme stratejileri ve halk anlatıları incelenmektedir. Sosyalist toplumsal cinsiyet çalışmalarının tersine, 1990’lı yılların Polonya edebiyat araştırmaları, kültür ve anlatılardaki cinsiyetçi milliyetçiliğin tarihi boyutu üzerinde yoğunlaşmıştır. 1990 yılında edebiyat tarihi araştırmalar Batı’nın teorik bilgileri birleştirilmiştir. İki alanda da yapılan çalışmalar, yüzlerini savaş öncesi edebiyata çevirerek ‘Batı’ teorileri kullanılarak feminizm-komünist ideoloji özdeşleştirilmesini kırma çabası içine girmişlerdir. Edebiyat araştırmaları ise kültürel hafızayı sorgulayarak milli kimlik ve geçmiş üzerinde yoğunlaşmıştır. Bu bazı durumlarda kadın deneyiminin ve kültürel çıktılarının ayırt edici özelliğinin ve feminist yaklaşımın farklılığının tespiti ile sonuçlanmıştır. Bu da bir anlamda feminizmi onaylamayan bir toplumda feminist kimliğin güçlenmesi olarak yorumlanabilir. Farklı teorik akımların eşzamanlı kabulü bazı kavramsal belirsizliklere yol açarken, bir yandan da bireyci yaklaşımlar belirli bir politik yaklaşıma entegre olmayı reddederek neoliberal kültürel dönüşümü desteklemektedirler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Polonya, komünizm, edebiyat araştırmaları, neoliberalizm, teori transferi, ideoloji, akademi.

Introduction

When socialism fell around 1990, the emerging societies were confronted with political and economic changes leading also to a high social instability. In post-socialist Poland of the 1990s, these instabilities invoked a conservative backlash concerning gender models. At the same time, feminist thought gained strength both in political activism and academic research. However, the transformation from a socialist state to a West-oriented, neoliberal society posed several specific, intersecting problems with which the recent feminist movement has had to deal. In order to embed feminism in Polish society, certain concessions to the dominating discourse are made, while other strategies work to deconstruct and transform popular narratives. In the following article, this setting of feminist agendas in a neoliberal context will be examined on the basis of gender oriented publications in Polish studies of the 1990s.

Transformational Backlash

Poland transformed from a socialist to a democratic state and market economy in 1989. Alongside the economic and political change, social and cultural discourses transformed as well. The struggle for freedom from the socialist system had been the dominating cause of the 1980s, leaving almost no discursive space for other engagements. Also for most women, the liberation of the people as such was the only justifiable commitment, and the few feminist voices remained unheard. As popular literary scholar Maria Janion remembers:

In the opposition of the 70s and 80s, it dominated the idea that the struggle for independence was a serious matter, whereas the struggle for women's rights was not. [...] I remember maintaining in an international feminist discussion in West Berlin at the end of the 80s that first, 'Solidarity' had to gain independence and democracy for the whole society. Only afterwards could it leisurely engage with the women's issue [...] (Janion, 1996: 326).

However, the democratic transformation did not develop into an equal and free society without discriminations (Graff, 2005: 17; Janion, 1996: 326f.). In the years of the transformation, society suffered from widespread destabilisation. Feminist Sławomira Walczewska notes:

A crazy drive without brakes started. Simultaneously, everything which could be used to hold on to gained importance, everything familiar and safe. On the Polish list of such 'odds-on favourites', the relationship between men and women among the top; in this relationship the roles and mutual attitude of both sides are traditionally formed according to the old, well-known noble-chivalrous gender contract (Walczewska, 1998: 8).

Gender norms perceived as ‘traditional’ gained in strength and resulted in a stricter division of spheres belonging to either men (public) or women (private). These tendencies were supported and reinforced by the influential Catholic Church, which had played a significant role in the pre-transformational opposition and could now elaborate its relevance in a destabilised society. The nuclear family gained new importance, tying women closer to reproductive duties. In 1993, the previously legal abortion was banned. This curtailment of women’s right of self-determination evoked larger protests and “led to the founding or consolidation of different committees” (Chołuj, 1998: 122). Women’s organisations had beforehand existed only on the margins (Walczevska, 2005: 5-20; Fuchs, 2003: 142). Many women came to realise that the so-called liberation of the Polish people did not automatically include women, and that yet another struggle had to be fought (Janion, 1996: 327). Literary and scholarly publications started to appear, engaging with gender roles in Polish society and literature.

It has been argued that the anti-abortion law of 1993, and also the dismissal of the gender parity law in 2003 were influenced by a strong anti-communist conservatism present in society. “The politicians were visibly securing their posts. Off with communism - what could they resume? Only the time, before communism, before the war. And Poland had been very Catholic before the war” (Chołuj, 2013: 3). Feminists underline the Machiavellian attitude many former communist politicians had towards gender issues. On the topic of gender roles, politicians found a common ground with the dominating traditionalism. “They adjudicated on living women, but in fact negotiated their position in the government” (Chołuj, 2013: 3). Furthermore, the abortion law was a matter of quick resolution and results, whilst many urgent, but complex and seemingly insolvable problems waited to be dealt with (Graff, 2005: 19; Mizielińska, 2011: 87f.). Social traditionalism concerning gender roles and political Machiavellism allied against the right of female self-determination.

Communist Connotations and Feminist Repulsion

Feminism and parity were - at least nominally - supported by the socialist state. Gender equality was established in law, women were to a large extent integrated in the workforce, and day care for children reached historic levels. This does not necessarily mean that women did not experience discrimination at work or in the political sphere. People were still submitted to a number of institutional and social mechanisms preventing equal rights and chances for all genders (Fidelis, 2010).

The socialist attempts at creating gender equality were narratively exploited after the transformation of 1989. Neotraditional discourses viewed the effort to abolish gender hierarchies as one of the main reasons for the claimed inhumanity of the socialist system. The socialist ‘feminisation’ was depicted as turning men into passive weaklings, as citizens were restricted

from the public sphere and the political, and obliged to act primarily in private spaces not directly penetrated by the state. American literature scholar and feminist writer Agnieszka Graff frames this 'national tale' in mocking words:

The Commune - the witch! the slut! - sent the Real Man into inner emigration, made him an allotment gardener, a do-it-yourself, a henpecked husband. He was imprisoned in the paranoid, 'women's world', where 'do it yourself' meant, 'make cupboards in the kitchen'. Indeed, this new, bastard, castrated man could act politically, but that meant servitude, careerism, conformism, utter debasement. And the woman? The Woman - according to the national tale - was fighting for the survival. Shopping was reported like 'hunting', even though it still lay in women's hands. This wasn't about shopping becoming the domain of men; it was about signalling that real socialism is an 'unnatural' situation, a world standing on its head. A world in which - how awful! - women are hunting (Graff, 2005: 23).

This sarcastic account is intended to underline the absurdity of the 'tale' about socialist feminocracy. While the conservative narrative depicts the socialist era as a time of crisis where the world stands on its head, Graff implies that the defenders of this narrative are themselves creating some sort of fool's carnival. She derides the 'tale' she describes by choosing exaggerated rhetoric, at the same time suggesting these narratives to be beyond reasonable acknowledgement. A more neutral statement can be found in historian Małgorzata Fidelis's book on female labour in the socialist system.

In the eyes of the majority of Polish society, women working in men's jobs would remain a powerful symbol of Soviet domination. [...] A woman performing a man's job was a threat not only to proper femininity but to Polishness as well (Fidelis, 2010: 229f).

The public discourse connects female wage work and female emancipation with communism and un-Polishness. In order to reverse the efforts of gender equality and return to a 'functional' society after the political transformation, conservative discourses reinstalled the 'natural' (i.e. Polish, non-communist and patriarchal) norms. The discursive fusing of communism and feminism in Poland and in other post-socialist states had an immense impact on the women's movement. In most people's minds, feminism was linked to the grey and repressive times of the Polish People's Republic. Public discourse regarded the feminists of the 1990s and onward as threatening the only just gained political freedom and suspected them of wanting to subjugate the people to yet another ideological system. This suspicion culminated in 2013, when Catholic circles announced a 'war on genderism'. The argument of priest Dariusz Oko represents the linking of feminism with communism:

[...] the atheists could no longer achieve power by using classical Marxism, which was already too disgraced. But like everyone, they need a world view, a meaning, a common understanding of reality. When

simple Marxism couldn't fulfil this function any more, they invented a mutation, which is genderism. [...] After 'class war', 'gender war' is preached (Oko, 2013).

While the accusations took on a new level of severity in 2013, in the 1990s feminists already experienced social disapproval because of its suspected socialist heritage (Iwasiów, 2013: 9). Therefore many feminists tried to elude the disadvantageous connotation, including an explicit disregard for communism. A common narrative of the 1990s' feminists was to object to the notion of communism supporting feminism. Feminism was depicted as having been co-opted and exploited by the socialist system, without the latter showing any real effort to install gender equality. Feminists perceived - and mostly still perceive - gender equality claimed by socialism to be mainly a hollow promise of equality (Kałwa, 2009: 175, 185).

Therefore, many Polish feminists directed their efforts after 1989 at the questioning of the relationship between feminism and the 'commune' (a term used synonymously for the People's Republic with a specific aesthetic marker). This contributed not only to the negation of the positive aspects of socialist policies regarding women's rights, but also cut feminist thought from its traditional leftist roots (Mrozik, 2012: 388).

Literary scholar Agnieszka Mrozik points out that the idea of 'dissociation in order to survive' (Mrozik, 2012: 390) was mainly popular with younger feminists. Born in the 60s and 70s, their generation had not profited from the socialist system's welfare policy and was generally more critical towards it.

Shifting Focuses

Regarding the post-transformational feminism's relation to socialism, Mrozik (2012: 390) is quite right in terming the unwanted socialist link a Kristevan abject, rhetorically driven out of discourse but constantly looming just around the corner. 1990s' feminism would break with socialist equality agendas and establish a narrative of the reawakening of 'real' feminism. "I had a feeling of superiority over the activists of the old League of Polish Women - as if they were dinosaurs" (Umińska-Keff, 2009: 20), said feminist Bożena Umińska-Keff as she recalled the time just after the transformation. The focus of interest of the post-transformational feminism shifted onto different matters, underlining its contrariness. Socialist feminism had been concerned with so-called materialist or economic topics - education, workforce, daycare etc. - related to women's integration into the labour market. Research on gender topics focused mainly on quantitatively measurable proceedings (Chołuj, 2013: 2; Fuchs, 2003: 61f.; Kałwa, 2009). Therefore in the 1990s, turning the issue upside down and strengthening qualitative analyses by concentrating on cultural aspects constituted a differing way of handling feminist requests. In this light the vanguard position of philological works on gender in the 1990s needs hardly be explained. Research turned to discourse analyses in

literature, culture and historiography. Notions of culture and discourse led the new studies on social and literary norms and myths. This culturalist approach in Polish feminist thought was moreover supported by the accelerated transfer of Western theories in the 1990s.

Let us take a closer look at feminist works of the 1990s Polish literary studies. The main interest here is to analyse if and how these works adapt to the setting described above after the transformation. I would like therefore to point out eventual interrelations between the socio-political frame and academic feminism. It is specifically interesting to investigate Polish studies as they are located on the intersection of literary studies, national historiography, and social discourse. The 1990s considered feminist Polish studies as a new field of methods and research, which resulted in experimental and path breaking works.

Feminist publications in Polish studies focused their research in the 1990s mainly on literary material from the times of the Partition of Poland (1795-1918) and the Second Polish Republic's interwar period (1918-1939). The first major feminist investigations created some sort of a literary historical map of female literature. The following examples concentrate mainly on the Polonists Grażyna Borkowska, Krystyna Kłosińska and Ewa Kraskowska, who published, respectively, in 1996 and 1999 influential monographs on women's literature. As comparative works, I will refer also to Maria Janion's publication (1996) on the othering of women in literature, consisting of studies written since the 1970s and to Inga Iwasiów's introduction to feminist theory and literature, a 2004 collection of her university lectures. These works are some of the best-known and most commonly referred-to feminist publications in Poland before the mid-2000s, when feminist research interests as well as methods were established enough to multiply and diversify.

Connecting Past and Present

The epoch of the Partition, in literary historical terms especially Polish Romanticism, played a key role in the forming of a national identity and introduced a highly gendered cultural symbolic order even though Poland did not exist as a state at this stage. Therefore literary scholar Janion, in her popularity a leading figure of feminist criticism, traces Polish gender stereotypes back to romanticist concepts of gender and their intermingling with the national idea (Janion, 1996). In late 19th century's and the interwar period's female writings on the other hand, scholars rediscovered feminist agendas and realised that women had to struggle with much the same issues as today. In pointing out these findings, post-transformational feminists re-established a tradition of feminist thought in Poland. They deconstructed the argument of a feminism imposed solely by Soviet communism - even though many interwar feminists were rooted in leftist, socialist ideas - or by the West, as a more recent conservative accusation implies. The early feminist writings,

including literature, are valuable for post-transformational feminists because they show emancipatory movements rooted in the Polish past.

Not only feminists were interested in pre-socialist history. Conservative discourses fetishised the interwar Second Polish Republic as reference point for national consciousness. This discursive returning to an earlier period is a symptom of both suppressed reappraisal of historical events like the Warsaw Uprising's collective trauma in Polish socialist historiography, and the post-transformational unwillingness to deal with the more recent past in a serious way. The discursive fusing of past epochs with the contemporary reality hints not only at the possibility of non-linear, cyclical developments, but also at the epochal shift in the reviewing of historical events. This shift seems to be due to efforts of breaking off from the more recent past by avoiding any discussion about it. By focusing on literature from before World War II, contemporary feminist Polonists omitted the tackling of socialist literary production. This silencing of socialist literature denies the relevance of communist conceptions for the post-socialist situation and turns it down as a possible source of inspiration. Many feminists compared contemporary reality immediately to the interwar period, as they focused on the similarities of both these social settings.

At the moment, Nałkowska has a great renaissance. Of course she is not an unknown writer, she has always been popular. But now people read her work and realise that certain problems she writes about - women at work, female poverty, adultery or abortion - are what women experience nowadays. Which is obviously shocking: so many similarities, while almost a hundred years have passed? But still. So you can read it not only as a literary monument, but also simply as female prose giving us something in the sense of identity (Iwasiów, 2013: 10).

Past literature discusses topics which are still (or again) disturbing today and serve as welcome inspiration. Grażyna Borkowska for example compares interwar feminist literature with Polish feminist literary output in the 1990s and concludes: "Contemporary feminist works [...], often considered a revelation in the history of our literature, are only a modest reference to the feminising model developed by Nałkowska and Wielopolska" (Borkowska, 1996: 255f.). Borkowska points out the rich feminist content in the works from the beginning of the 20th century. She also writes about this topic in an earlier essay: "Feminist, rebellious-narcissistic precedents have occurred in Polish literature and have passed not without echo. But that is one of the things you cannot, unfortunately, notice from the perspective of Paris or New York" (Borkowska, 1994: 184). Borkowska notes the missing link between contemporary times and interwar literature. The Polish feminist writers of the early 1990s are mostly living abroad. Borkowska questions their knowledge of the Polish literary tradition, as they seem not to live up to the feminist precursors. But also the public praising contemporary feminist texts as novelty seems to overlook interwar feminism. While especially the mentioned

Nałkowska is a canonised writer, the feminist strands in her work did not receive appropriate attention. Feminist literary scholars of the 1990s therefore try to diversify the image of inter- and pre-war literature by investigating into forgotten feminist agendas. They relate contemporary feminism to a century-old tradition. The continuum of feminist thought had only been interrupted by the socialist gender agenda and could now be picked up again.

Contesting National Narratives of Devotion

By tracing these historical relations, today's feminist Polonists not only challenge the notion of feminism as something new and alien; they also replenish the historiography about these times. Reviving feminist authors and agendas of the pre- and interwar period counters the national-conservative patriarchal discourse which had gained strength after the post-1989 transformation. It shows that the historical discourse focusing solely on the Polish past's mythologised patriarchal constitution is an ideological exclusion of differing voices and designed to create a specific image of the past. The transformation and reconstruction of social and cultural discourse in the 1990s rests largely on these images of the past. Feminist arguments interfere with mainstream narratives in the process of historiographical reviewing (Janion, 2006: 7, 329; Wierzbicki, 1984: 94). For example, a national-martyriologic narrative is quite popular in contemporary conservative discourses. This discourse depicts historical periods and events mainly as great historical injustice done to the Polish nation. These narratives range from the suppression of the people by the socialist system to the patriotic struggle for independence in the 19th century, when Poland had been partitioned between Prussia, the Russian and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These narratives of a self-sacrificing nation have a gendered dimension. While mostly men were the armed actors, e.g. the uprisings in the 19th century, women played an important role as well. Romantic literature shows Polish women to be as fierce patriots as their husbands and sons. The national poet Adam Mickiewicz even points out the heightened importance of women in Poland:

This is the unavoidable path of humanity: you have to offer sacrifice to gain a right. In this way the woman in Poland freed herself; she has here greater freedom than anywhere else, she is more esteemed, she feels herself a comrade of man. Not by speaking lengthily about women's rights, or by proclaiming imaginary theories women gain importance in society, but only by devotion (Adam Mickiewicz at the Collège de France, Paris 17.06.1842, cit. in Janion, 1996: 96f).

Mickiewicz links the granting of rights directly to devotion. He welcomes the emancipation of Polish women, because they do not struggle for their gender's rights; only by selflessly sacrificing themselves for the national cause, they should be granted esteem and a place in society by their male fellows.

Polish women might have profited in the past from a relatively liberal society and social esteem. But this social empowerment was framed by the requested commitment to the national cause. Moreover, high social esteem did not necessarily lead to the dissolving of patriarchal family structures and social restrictions. It is exactly this framing of female empowerment in terms of the national cause that Borkowska inveighs against. She perceives historical research to be focused one-sidedly on the female patriotic commitment:

One cannot help but notice, that the ‚feminist‘ reflection has a patriotic-martyriologic character in relation to the 19th century. It studies and rewards those behaviour patterns which have a patriotic undertone connected to the struggle for independence. What is more, wherever traces of [female] interest for the public sphere have been preserved, a patriotic attitude or national-liberational motivation is ascribed to the female participants of these events (Borkowska, 1996: 33).

Borkowska accuses historical studies from the 1980s and 1990s of an ideologically sided approach. Even though she calls these studies feminist, they do not show a critical examination of the common historical discourse. In Poland academic discourses in the humanities often contented themselves with the mystified image of the strong-willed, patriotic, and esteemed wife, mother, and bearer of the national culture known as *Matka Polka* (Mother Pole). Conservative public discourse finds therefore an ally in some strands of historical women’s studies. Borkowska and other feminist literary scholars attempt to create a differing narrative about female agency in the 19th century. They draw upon female literature of the time to track diverging interpretations of social life, agency and gendered structures.

Investigating into Female Difference

Public discourse interprets past female agency in patriotic terms. Thus it ties women’s issues tightly to the national cause. Feminist researchers intend to loosen this tie and grant female agency of the past a relevance of its own. The dissection from the patriotic concepts results in a general de-politicisation of female agency and the strengthening of differentialist approaches. In the example discussed above, Borkowska criticised historical research for its biased viewpoint. But when she writes: “The politicisation of activities apolitical by nature is a characteristic attitude of the scholars interested in female activity in the 19th century” (Borkowska, 1996: 36), she herself shows a set interpretation of female agency. She rhetorically naturalises the claimed apolitical female stance as a historical given. Neither does she discuss her definition of (a)political acts. Borkowska restricts female agency to a sphere which seems to be detached from the society in general, thus creating a womanhood based on difference.

Similar arguments appear in the discussion of women authors’ literary styles. Contemporaneous literary criticism was commonly dismissive of past

female writing as lacking literary talent. Feminist literary scholars therefore often research female literature not considered as masterpieces (Kłosińska, 1999; Kraskowska, 1999). Here as well, the argument of difference appears. Kłosińska notes the male critic's;

...lack of acceptance of a to him foreign experience and world, in which such prosaic activities like 'drinking coffee' a bath and walks raise to the level of history. The great male history happens somewhere else (not on walks) and consists of different events as those registered in the [female] novel [...]. The women excluded from this history note their own little history: a history of trifles (Kłosińska, 1999: 18f).

Kłosińska points out the diverging experiences of women, which lead to a different style of writing - and the disapproval of the male public. "Together with female literary production, 'fiddling around' ['krząctwo'] appeared in literature" (Kraskowska, 1999: 98), Kraskowska states in her work on female interwar literature.

Men don't like *The Whole Life of Sabina*¹. This novel is just not interesting for them. What kind of heroine is that supposed to be - even in the last flashes of consciousness [before death] she wonders about what is happening in the kitchen (Kraskowska, 1999: 98)?

In order to revalue the 'fiddling' style of female writing concentrated around objects and activities of everyday life, Kraskowska points out diverging gendered literary preferences. In both her and Kłosińska's interpretation, female writing (and reading) is of a different order than male literary production. The measurement of female literature by normative, male standards does not take gendered differences into consideration. In female writing, form and content promise new insights to be uncovered by feminist literary criticism. Feminist literary historiography is looking for evidence of female consciousness and traces of society's gendered structuring.

It is said about feminist criticism - sometimes in a reproachful manner - that it supports women's community in the forming and strengthening of self-awareness. The desired subject of research turns out to be 'female identity'. Fiction has started to trace female identity long before psychology [...] (Kraskowska, 1999: 87f).

Kraskowska clearly states the function of both (historical) female literature and feminist literary criticism: to outline female identity, female consciousness. Literature serves hereby as a valid prism for the understanding of gendered social structures. In Kraskowska's view, in order to gain a comprehensive insight into past social structures, the divergent female writing has to be taken into account as well. In engaging with the perception of past gender concepts, the feminist interpretation of female writing also replenishes contemporary discourses about gender roles. As could be seen in the examples so far, feminist literary concepts of the 1990s focus upon a

feminism of difference. They revalue both female writing and the sphere of female experience, and invest in a clear distinction of male and female spheres. As such they ascribe essentialist characteristics to the (female) gender. Such tendencies are supported by the theoretical framework used in these studies, as French feminists such as Luce Irigaray or American feminists Elaine Showalter and Nancy K. Miller appear often as reference points.

Essentialist gender conceptions focusing on female identity in 1990s feminist works are also a product of the specific social context. Neither feminist arguments nor a female consciousness of a common 'womanhood' had effectively been present in the latter decades of socialism. In part, feminist literary criticism and the reading of past female literature served therefore to invoke an awareness of gendered experiences. However, while the social context made differentiation and identity politics necessary, at the same time public discourse's ideological reproaches as well as the contemporaneous feminist theoretical framework contributed to prevent it.

Narratives of Catching Up: Fuzziness and a Double-Bind

With the transformation of 1989, in Polish society's discourse prevailed narratives of catching up with the current level of progress. Because of the socialist system, people perceived their societies to be anachronistic in terms of global development. This is true as well for the humanities, which had mainly engaged with structuralist theories since the 1970s. They felt isolated from 'Western' academic production and theoretical trends. With the dissolution of the ideological barrier in the 1990s however, Polish academia started to invest in its theoretical integration. Theoretical and methodological ideas from different cultural and temporal settings simultaneously found their way into the Polish academy, which led to a synchronisation of these inputs (Kulpa, Mizielińska, 2011: 15). Meanwhile, the Marxist background of many theories such as poststructuralist ideas was withheld. Also in Polish studies, transferred theories were welcomed as a way to emancipate research from socialist-informed structuralism, perceived often as dry, restrictive, and impersonal (Borkowska, 2013: 1; Iwasiów, 2013: 1). Many scholars started experimenting with new paradigms, rejoicing in the newly discovered methodological liberties. For example, psychoanalysis found its way into Polonistic works, often in the form of critical examinations in feminist receptions. Such a case can be found in Kłosińska's discussion of female writing, introducing simultaneously Freudian arguments and their deconstruction to the Polish reader: "Female activism is non-deliberate (unlike male), but driven by physical urges. [...] Female activity is better named, following Sarah Kofman (deconstructing Freud), a pseudo-activity which would only be a means to reach the passive goal" (Kłosińska, 1999: 14). The multi-layered intertextuality referring to both argument and its critique at the same time can lead to a certain blurring of theoretical threads. Often, the intermingling and combination of feminist theoretical approaches results

in a certain methodological fuzziness. In her book about female writers at the turn of the 19th century, Borkowska notes as follows:

And the method? Do we make a decided choice among the presented suggestions? No - in this work, being one of the first bigger feminist publications on Polish literature, such a choice would be a restriction. It is clear however, that it will be a work reinterpreting to some extent established judgements. Because such is the profit and danger resulting from this 'new' method (Borkowska, 1996: 20).

According to this statement, Borkowska tries to leave the methodological question as open as she can; therefore, the reader learns little about the specifics of 'feminist' methods. Borkowska's writing of the term 'feminist' in quotation marks hints at the fuzziness of the concept. Meanwhile, she also refers to the multitude of presented methods. Borkowska suggests that these have been developed already outside the Polish context and are ready to be appropriated and applied in Polish literature studies.

The introduction of Western feminist thought played an important role as well in the establishment of a feminist consciousness. In the Polish People's Republic, gendered differentiations were not officially debated as the law guaranteed, and the system nominally provided gender equality. But also in civil society or the opposition, gender structures were not considered to be of political relevance (Fuchs, 2003: 57; Graff, 2005: 17f). The rift between us - the people - and them - the socialist system - was so powerful it did not leave space for discussion of further differentiations by intersecting axes. After 1989, women suffered from the economic liberalisation more than men (Chotuj, 1998: 122; Chotuj, 2013: 6; Fuchs, 2003: 113-144 *passim*), but public discourse did not interpret these developments necessarily in gendered terms. Also there was a reinforcement of traditional gender models.

Feminist activists therefore tried to establish the category of gender as an analytical axis of social structures. One part of the feminist agenda was to raise consciousness for gendered hierarchies. In speaking out to women, feminists would have to address them as such, as a social category. This referring to a certain social group did not resonate well in post-transformational society. Public discourse dismissed such classifications as an ideological remnant of socialism, and linked feminism to class war. In a society which had just abolished its socialist system, this connotation rendered feminist argumentations hugely unattractive (Graff, 2006: 39; Iwasiów, 2013: 9).

Even though the transfer of Western, 'bourgeois feminist writings' contested the notion of feminism as socialist ideology, it did not dissolve the problem. Many contemporary feminist publications in the West presented the category of womanhood as an outdated model, an unacceptable hegemonic generalisation. If Polish feminists wanted to draw inspiration from these theories, they had to constitute their category while simultaneously deconstructing it. This might not be the case for the feminist literary studies of the 1990s, which focused mainly on a feminism of difference. But in the

following years and with newer, post-identitarian theories at hand, the problem of this double-bind arose. In her work *Gender for the intermediate*, an overview over Western feminist theory as well as feminist literature in Poland, Inga Iwasiów notes in 2004:

Let's return to reality: isn't the utopian construction marvelling, which is endlessly broadening and adding, which wants to erase in us the very tendency to classify? Because the political problem starts from this tendency? We, the women of the new world, should care about society's opening. We don't have to form support groups to study our bodies. [...] Maybe we can overcome several hurdles at once. We have the theory, developed somewhere else, and our not very exciting reality. To work, dear ladies. A work which does not force us to change one pressure group for another; which respects our individuality (Iwasiów, 2004: 82).

While Iwasiów rejects the notion of a homogeneous category for all women, she nonetheless directs her words to a specific but nonetheless fuzzy group: the 'women of the new world', into which she includes herself. Iwasiów entrusts the group with a mission (we should care about society's opening) and urges it to take action. In giving such advice to the group, Iwasiów simultaneously constitutes it. But whereas on the textual platform she creates a common space, she denies it on the social level: support groups are not needed. It is the hope to overcome several hurdles at once, catching up with both Western social standards and academic development, which leads to these oscillating statements.

Toward a Culturalist Individualism

Iwasiów shows concern about the contemporary discourses in Western feminist theory, but she also picks up a mode of thinking common in 1990s Poland. In line with neoliberal morals and free market economy, the ethics of communal unity have lost ground. While public discourse still upholds a national feeling of belonging and community, practical ethics have shifted to patterns of individualistic effort and performance.

In feminist literary critique, the shift towards the individual also reflects a distancing from communist connotations. Borkowska for example traces three barriers for the development of feminist literature in post-war Poland. One of them was the excessive politicisation of any behaviour. No-one, writes Borkowska, "could protect their privacy in this country where communal thinking was practised" (Borkowska, 1993: 241). If Borkowska sees politicisation, communal thinking and the lack of privacy as a hindrance for feminist/female literary production, she implies a connection between the female and the private and individual. The feminist call would accordingly be a retreat from macro-communal thinking. In terms of feminist literary studies this turn hardly surprises: the studied female writing style of "fiddling around" is in itself an individualistic approach, as its context is often the household space occupied by a single woman. Also Iwasiów rhetorically locates the

women she speaks to inside their homes: "The world outside the window doesn't yet know, that womanhood is something else than cooking meals?" (Iwasiów, 2004: 82). She isolates the women in their houses, putting a barrier (the window) between them and the world going on outside. There is no obvious connection to other women in other houses, the dichotomy concerns only the individual woman in contrast to the world outside the window. This latter is connoted as male and collective, since it has an external but unified opinion on womanhood.

Both examples depict the woman or the female as external to society as such, ascribing to her an individualised, private sphere. This retreat from macro-social dynamics finds expression also in a concentration of the research prism on gender alone. In singling out women from society, the 1990s' feminist literary research also singles out the gender axis from intersecting categories. When in the 1970s and 80s, Polish feminist pioneer Janion started to investigate gendered exclusion, she integrated gender as one dimension of transgression. Her interest in transgressions evident in literature incorporated all sorts of social marginalisations, e.g. due to (mental) illnesses, class differences or sexual transgressions. The feminist literary studies of the 1990s and onward however clearly champion gender differentiation, fading out internal differences in the category of women. Let us therefore return to the question of constructing gender identity and ask with Kristen Ghodsee:

Why might it be politically important to construct women as disadvantaged despite the fact that there is a great deal of heterogeneity among women within and among Eastern European countries? The production and perpetuation of certain discourses may be essential ideological building blocks in the construction of the new, material reality of post socialist nations (Ghodsee, 2004: 736).

Ghodsee touches upon the topic of integration into mainstream (Western) neoliberal agendas. She argues that the focus upon gender and the import of a bourgeois, cultural feminism diverted public attention from increasing class divergences after 1989. Feminism therefore aided the implementation of the new market economy. Its focus on individual performance and the private subject was in line with neoliberal demands of personal investment. In turning upon a cultural feminism and engaging mainly with cultural expressions of gendered marginalisation, it neglected economic and social issues (see also Mrozik, 2012).

While Ghodsee writes about women's NGOs in Eastern Europe, these arguments apply to some extent to the field of Polish studies, too. It is not astonishing that the disciplines of cultural studies such as literary research were quickest to incorporate the new theories in their work. Apart from Polish studies, American studies took the leading role in the procession of Western feminist theory. While literary studies are undeniably part of a cultural interpretation of the social world, they have also often focused upon cultural differentiations in their material, e.g. the symbolic gender order inherent in

the national narrative. Engagement with economic disadvantages, class hierarchies or political exclusions can be found only on the margins of Polish feminist literary studies in the 1990s, if at all.

It seems the exchange between academic feminism and political activism in Poland was rather lively, as many feminist activists were at the same time scholars and had often spent some time in Western countries (Fuchs, 2003: 119). In the feminist Polonist texts however, one can hardly find traces of this exchange. On the contrary, some texts even distance themselves from political activism. One of the most striking examples appeared in a 1993 article by Kraskowska:

The term 'feminism' must be understood in two ways: first - as a general interest in women's problems in arts and human sciences, second - as a movement intending to establish equal rights, often including elements of aggression against the opposite gender. It seems in Poland the word feminist is only associated with a person belligerently oriented, usually somewhat neglected and with a controversial morality - a stage most representatives of European and American feminism have parted with some dozen years ago (Kraskowska, 1993: 261).

Kraskowska here not only clearly distinguishes the academic feminism from its activist counterpart. She also attributes the latter with negative terms derived from the public discourse. Kraskowska even accuses activists of negatively influencing feminism's reputation by being too radical (Kraskowska, 1999: 8). In Kraskowska's understanding, such aggressive, controversial stances should be already extinct, as the reference to the Western stage of feminist progress implies.

Such arguments fit well with the call for an individual and apolitical female sphere. This female 'counterworld' was not thought of as a sphere of commonality and action but a world of one's own, an intimate, individual withdrawal from patriarchy to find solace in inner strength. Iwasiów sees female (in this case lesbian) literature as a break from the intellectual requirement to handle divergences:

The woman carries us out of the patriarchal order. The smell of the skin lulls. Motherhood and sisterhood guarantee safety. The journey to this planet² is like a holiday from the poetic game of variety. It is quite strange and at the same time safe; tensions are annulled (Iwasiów, 2004: 74).

Further on, Iwasiów notes the division between a literary counterworld and the requirements of reality in even more clear-cut words: "I encourage to reflection: what about the roles in Polish reality? What about the roles in myself? Luckily, we don't have to answer, we can return to literature" (Iwasiów, 2004: 76). While literature is treated as an escape from the challenging reality and investment in (the transformation of) gender roles, it is also a place where the production of female identity can happen. In sharing experiences and thoughts through literature, women could therefore find

some sort of commonality. Kłosińska discloses a similar concept, developed on female writing of past periods:

Excluded from public speaking, limited to express themselves in the frames of the permitted norm, women find for themselves enclaves where they cure their own aphasia, where their speech is liberated. [...] In this way, female writing circulates in a female underground. It is not autistic, the woman does not write for herself: she has her circle of readers. The blood ties between mother and daughter regulates this secret communication (Kłosińska, 1999: 26).

Even though Kłosińska refers here (probably) to the end of the 19th century - as the temporal setting of her research material - she implies this situation of female writing as ongoing. In using the present tense, she does not differentiate between now and then, leaving the temporal framing open. Without this historical localisation, the sketched situation takes on an ahistorical, eternal touch. Kłosińska therefore suggests that a female sense of community functions still mainly through literature.

Conclusion

Polish feminist literary studies in the 1990s show some specifics which can be interpreted in the light of their socio-political setting. A main hindrance for the acceptance of feminist thought in public discourse is its connotation with communism. Moreover, there is a powerful narrative of the Polish people, while in economic reality society dissolves into its individual parts regardless of gender differentiation. In this last section, I would like to contrast the above literary studies examples and findings to this setting. Are these findings symptomatic of a time of social dissolution and reorientation, structured symbolically by traditional understandings of gender and nation?

In focusing on literature from before World War II, feminist Polish studies follow a common trend in the emerging democratic society. Public discourse traces concepts of Polishness to these times in order to erase socialist influence in society. Literary scholars assume a similar pattern, showing disregard for the negatively connoted socialist epoch. The choice of research material at least does not reinforce the discursive link between feminism and communism. The feminist engagement with pre-war literature and culture, however, shows signs of a struggle over the power of cultural auto-definition. While conservative narratives present coherent models for both gender and national consciousness, feminist literary scholars infiltrate these discourses with diverging interpretations and findings. Most striking here is the feminist refusal to view past female agency in terms of sacrifice for the national cause. In refusing the national-political dimension, feminist Polonists turn their attendance to female agency as an end in itself. They detach womanhood from society as a whole in order to reconstitute it. Pre-war female literature provides inspirations for female identity, which the feminist Polonists are

attempting to integrate into contemporary debates about femininity. The main focus rests however on forming a distinct, intimate and non-political womanhood, which results in both a hegemonic concept and a retreat from social politics. Both these effects tend to exclude contesting opinions on femininity from the academic feminist discourse. This championing of a feminism of difference and identity politics neglects socio-economic factors, as it turns mainly to analysing symbolic differentiations and cultural phenomena. In this regard, it can be viewed as a reversal of the socialist project of gender equality, which had disregarded the cultural aspects of gender differentiation.

Another specific of the post-transformational setting is the increased reception of feminist theories. The abundance of Western feminist theory produces a narrative of lagging behind in the field of feminist literary studies. This narrative is common to society in general and results in a race to catch up with global progress. It also eliminates possible alternative directions of development, focusing solely on the idolised Western societies. In feminist literary studies, the reception of theories developed somewhere else in the 1990s results in multi-layered and often fuzzy approaches. With the 2000s, contradictions in the simultaneous reception of diverging feminist ideas emerge, revealing the problems of, for example, an essentialist approach to female identity.

The reception of liberal Western feminist ideas seemed to counteract the association of feminism with communism. But from a conservative view, also the interference from the West is seen as a threat to national sovereignty. Feminism is nowadays accused of both attempting to return to communism as well as acting on the EU's behalf to raze the Polish Catholic societal order. Feminist - and with it feminist literary studies' - orientations in the 1990s have to some extent provided public acceptance, as they turned socialist concepts down and championed a (neo)liberal society. The shift from economic issues to cultural phenomena resonated with the public desire for both identity negotiations and expunging socialist experience in favour of settling in a globalised culture. Identity, individualism and privacy superseded collectivism and the political dimension of the private sphere. However, this change of direction has also led to criticism, accusing feminism of intellectualism and neglecting economic issues and the specific social context in Poland (Ostałowska, 2007; Waloch-Matlakiewicz, 2015). Still nowadays, feminist positions are constantly marginalised and othered by conservative public discourses.

Notes

¹*Całe życie Sabiny* (1934) by Helena Boguszevska.

²*Iwasiów* discusses the volume of poems *Planet* (1997) by Ewa Sonnenberg, a poetical escape into a world of lesbian sisterhood.

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